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Dear Eric,

Matchpoints, North-South vulnerable:

♠ A J 8
♥ Q 7
♦ K 10 8 4 3
♣ J 4 3

♠ K 10 7 5 4
♥ 10 6 5
♦ A 7
♣ A Q 6

West	North	East	South
		Pass	1 ♠
2 ♥	3 ♥ (?)	Pass	3 ♠ (?)
4 ♥	Pass (?)	Pass	4 ♠ (?)
All Pass			

Is the North hand worth a limit raise or is 2 ♠ enough? Does 3 ♥ here imply four trumps so that North should first make a negative double then support spades later? (If this hand isn't good enough, what if North were slightly stronger with three trumps?) After the 3 ♥ raise/cuebid, should South sign off in 3 ♠ or bid game? I held the South hand and didn't like my shape or number of losers although I was a point or two stronger than some hands we open.

The most important questions

Our Readers Ask

come on the next round. After hearing partner sign off in 3 ♠, should North double 4 ♥? And if he doesn't, should South go on to 4 ♠, thinking North has no wasted values in hearts — something such as:

♠ A Q 8 2 ♥ 9 ♦ K 9 7 5 4 ♣ 8 7 2
or

♠ A Q 8 2 ♥ 9 3 ♦ J 6 5 ♣ K 7 5 2?

Or is there never a hand where South should bid 4 ♠ after signing off in 3 ♠? Finally, if North had held, say:

♠ A Q 8 2 ♥ 9 ♦ K 9 7 5 4 ♣ 8 7 2
should he bid 4 ♠ himself over 4 ♥?

As it turns out, 4 ♠ was makeable, but neither my partner nor I were happy about the way we bid it!

Ed Herstein

Most would bid 3 ♥ with North's hand, but the missing fourth trump is significant enough to make that questionable. After all, if the ♥ Q has no value, the North hand is worth no more than 2 ♠. As you suggest, the negative double would be a sensible alternative to 2 ♠ or 3 ♥, particularly as South might rebid 2NT with an honor in hearts, creating a scenario in which the ♥ Q appears to be an asset and the North hand assumes its full high-card value. Many experts would reject the negative double for fear that either the competition or partner will drive the bidding to the four-level before North can show his spade support. There is something to that argument, of course, but the possibility of getting too high is balanced by the negative double's space-saving flexibility, which will often help responder to describe his strength more accurately. Should South accept North's game invitation? If you base your decision on the Losing Trick Count, the limit

raise is typically an eight-loser hand and South has seven losers. With 15 losers, you should contract to take no more than nine tricks ($24 - 15 = 9$), so South should sign off at 3 ♠. And here, North has nine losers, not eight, which suggests that his hand is not worth a limit raise. The ♠ 10, prime values, and no wastage in hearts make this a close decision for South, however. Facing a limit raise with four trumps, it would not be unreasonable to accept the game invitation.

Once South makes this decision, both North and South should theoretically pass out 4 ♥, although either could double with decent defensive values. Much depends on their assessment of West. Players who bid this way (2 ♥, then a voluntary 4 ♥) often have surprises for you, such as 7-5 shape, and it would not be surprising that some of your high cards will get ruffed away.

Bidding 4 ♠ "later" is generally a poor idea. Hands with A-Q-x-x of trumps and an "unshowable" singleton should not make limit raises, even without the respectable side five-card suit in your example hands. Do yourself a favor and commit to game with those hands; you'll sleep better. When your partner can't find out about your singleton in time, take the pressure off.

When North has:

♠ A Q 8 2 ♥ 9 3 ♦ J 6 5 ♣ K 7 5

for his limit raise, you can see that game is decent although North has an eight-loser hand (which is why the LTC not adjusted for judgment and the developing auction is somewhat flawed). That's why I said it would not be unreasonable to bid 4 ♠ early with the South hand facing a known fourth trump. It's the mesh in a known nine-card fit that makes these two hands play better.